

Rothenburg ob der Tauber

Architectural gem in Franken highlands preserves serenity, charm of Middle Ages

**Story and photos
by David Ruderman**

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Gently holding the heights above a bucolic river valley south of Würzburg, Rothenburg ob der Tauber opens the door to the long gone world of medieval Germany. Visitors from the 104th Area Support Group can reach this architectural gem in the Franken uplands within hours to step back in time to a remarkably well preserved urban landscape that formed half a millennium ago.

Having come up to Rothenburg on the train, it took my wife and me all of 15 minutes meandering the nearly empty side streets of the old town to realize why we felt so relaxed—it was so quiet we could hear the wind in the trees and the footsteps of our four-and-a-half-year-old daughter as she raced ahead of us down lanes in which automobiles were a rarity.

While the town thrives on tourism and buses arrive constantly in the parking lots outside the city walls to disgorge hordes of snapshot shooting tourists from around the world, Rothenburg is so extensively well preserved that quiet corners and out-of-the-way nooks are never hard to find. The beautifully painted and ornamented homes and public buildings, the impressive churches and open spaces tell the quiet tale that residents of centuries past must have loved their city.

A Celtic settlement site above the Tauber River in antiquity, Rothenburg entered the annals of history as a settlement called Detwang about 960 A.D. A fortress was built in the next decade and an imperial castle in 1142. Rothenburg was proclaimed an Imperial Free City in 1247 and flourished for 150 years as a trading center on the land routes linking Northern Europe and the Mediterranean. Its popula-

tion in 1400 was about 6,000.

Like many imperial urban centers of the period, Rothenburg weathered the wars and constant upheavals of the following centuries that saw the end of the medieval world and the advent of modern Europe. In 1544 the city adopted the Lutheran Reformation. In 1631, in a minor event of the Thirty Years War, it was besieged and captured by Catholic forces under the command of Johan Tzerclaes von Tilly, and thereby hangs a tale that has been retold ever since.

Der Meistertrunk

The story goes that von Tilly threatened to execute the city councilors and raze the town but decided on a whim to spare the Rothenburgers if one of them would drink an enormous ceremonial flagon of Franken wine in one go. The mayor of the time, Georg Nusch, rose to the occasion, and with one Meistertrunk, or master draught, saved the day by downing over three liters of wine. The deed has been a byword of Rothenburg ever since.

“Der Meistertrunk,” a play retelling the siege and salvation story, is an historical re-enactment penned by the Rothenburger poet and master glazier Adam Hörber in the late 19th century. First performed on Pfingstmontag [Whitmonday] 1881, the play was an immediate success and has been an attraction for visitors and the centerpiece of annual Pentecost celebrations ever since. Additional performances this year will be held Sept. 5, Oct. 2 and 9.

While the play is performed inside the Rathaus, the city abounds with troupes of Rothenburgers dressed as bands of mounted knights, singing peasants and marauding brigands. Tourists and locals alike mix in the cobblestone streets to enjoy the veneration of the past

and keep the tradition alive. It all makes for a good humored carnival of music, theater and spectacle.

Rothenburg maintained its independence until being annexed to the kingdom of Bavaria in 1802. As a sleepy backwater largely unchanged by the transformations of the Industrial Revolution, it benefited from the Romantic revival of the 19th century that valued tradition over modernity. The town became a center of traditional arts and developed into the tourist center that it is today.

At the heart of the town stands the Rathaus, an agglomeration of Gothic and Renaissance styles built between the 13th and 17th centuries. An observation deck is accessible from its tower. Bands of tourists gather daily in front of the nearby Ratstrinkhalle, City Councilors Tavern, to take in the hourly tolling of intricately carved clocks.

The town’s principal house of worship is the Jakobskirche, erected between 1311 and 1485. It is home to the well-known Heilig Blut [Sacred Blood] altar by Tilman Riemenschneider, a famed Würzburg sculptor and contemporary of Albrecht Dürer.

Other rainy day attractions include the Reichstag Museum with its extensive collections of historical artifacts and reconstructions of cloister life. A Mittelalterliches Kriminal Museum displays the apurtenances of medieval torture and shame for those so inclined, and a Puppen und Spielzeug Museum offers collections of cuteness and kitsch.

But the great joy of Rothenburg is to wander its streets and squares to soak in the atmosphere of an earlier world in which residents were inclined to beautify their everyday world and take the time to enjoy it. An extensive network of covered walkways snakes along the well preserved city walls, affording visitors the pleasure of constantly modulating views of the cityscape and the surrounding countryside.

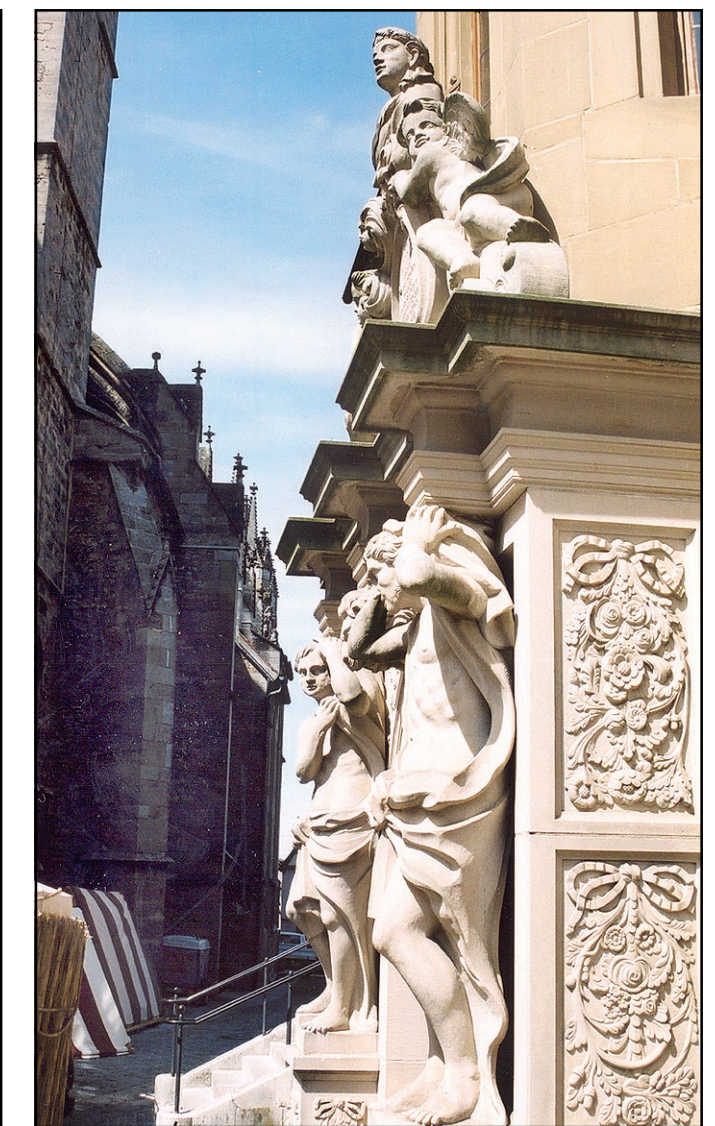


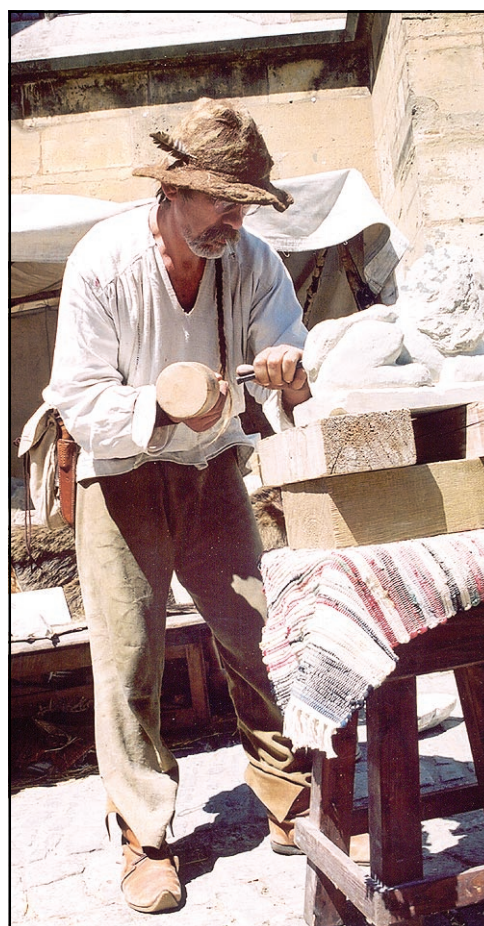
Photo left: Musicians parade in front of the Rathaus after a traditional performance of the Schäfertanz, or shepherd's dance, on Whitmonday. Photo above: Architectural details adorning the facade of a building across from the Jakobskirche look out over the re-creation of a medieval market.



Rothenburgers dressed as knights re-enact the 1631 siege and defeat of the town at the hands of Catholic forces under the command of Johan Tzerclaes von Tilly during the Thirty Years War.



The Jakobskirche shoots its Gothic spires heavenward, contributing to the Rothenburg skyline as it has since the late 15th century.



A sculptor carves a lion at a medieval market.

Youth hostelling around Germany

By David Ruderman

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Traveling through Europe is its own reward—proximity to its landscapes, cultural landmarks and gastronomic amenities is a benefit of serving overseas.

For those who would like to get out and about, but not break the bank for accommodations on the road or sleep in the family van, there is an alternative to hotels that is convenient, comfortable and fun—the Deutsches Jugend Herbergen or German Youth Hostelling Association.

The DJH oversees a network of hostels across Germany, in the countryside and in most urban centers, that takes the bite out of overnight stays. Prices vary from hostel to hostel, ranging from about €13-25 per night, including breakfast served in a communal dining room.

If you are a member of an American youth hostel association such as Hostelling International USA, simply make reservations and present your card when you check in. Annual membership, \$28 for adults, \$18 for those over age 55 and free to those under age 18, can be secured via the Internet at www.hiusa.org.

Membership in a hostelling association is not required for guests of the DJH. Nonmembers can purchase a Hostelling International Card with six “welcome stamps” or overnight tickets for €18.60. Additional welcome stamps can be purchased for €3.10.

Families with a German connection can join the DJH directly. Annual rates for individuals up to age 26 are €12, €20 for families and individuals age 27 and up. Details are on the web at www.jugendherberge.de.

Guests can elect to add the price of lunch and dinner as well to their stay. Meals are simple, served cafeteria style and add about €5 for half pension and €8 for full pension. In many hostels nightly rates decline slightly for guests who stay more than one or two nights.

The DJH website, www.jugendherberge.de, lists hostels by region, detailing kinds of accommodation available and contact information. Travelers can make reservations over the web for about 150 of the almost 600 sites. For the others, call or email the contacts provided. Staff members usually speak English and are generally very pleasant to deal with.

Travelers should note that hostels in Bavaria accommodate individuals only up to the age of 26. Families are accepted as guests, but older individuals will have to make other sleep-

ing arrangements in southern Germany.

Guests can count on sharing sleeping quarters with other travelers, so come ready to be friendly. The DJH’s motto is *Langweile streng verboten*—boredom is prohibited—and the experience of being a guest lives up to the marketing hype. One is likely to share the hostel with school groups, church groups, families from near and far, backpackers from around the world and the occasional eccentric or two. It’s fun to strike up conversations, and children enjoy the energetic ambience.

Locking closets are typically located in sleeping rooms to store baggage while out and about. While security is a minor issue, be sure to always take your valuables with you.

Etiquette at DJH is simple. When you arrive, check in at the reception to be assigned your room for the night. Pick up your bedding—a sheet, a pillow case and a blanket cover. Note that sleeping bags are not permitted. Showers and toilets for men and women are shared by all guests.

Once you settle in you are free to come and go as you wish. When sharing rooms with others, be sure to be considerate. Front doors

are usually locked at a certain hour, but guests are provided either a key or automatic entry code for access. On the morning you check out, deposit your linens in the central collection point.

Sleeping arrangements usually entail bunk beds. Families are accommodated to the extent possible with rooms of their own. Quiet hours typically begin at 10 p.m. Most hostels have lounges or separate areas for quiet socializing.

Staying with the DJH is great for either weeklong retreats in rural locations or city weekend getaways. If planning visits to urban centers consider making arrangements to travel by train, going directly to the hostel by foot or public transportation and leaving the car at home.

With hundreds of youth hostels across Germany to choose from, building inexpensive accommodations into summer travel plans is easy. If their style fits yours, you’ll find yourself traveling more often, staying longer when you do and helping put boredom to rest.

